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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a preservice elementary education program that incorporated more time spent at school sites. The program consisted of three consecutive semesters of courses combined with fieldwork. The first semester included a methods course, a reading class, and a children's literature class. Additional time was spent in the field observing and teaching elementary students. The next semester, students took five methods courses (mathematics, science, social studies, language arts, and reading). They spent every day in their field sites and an intensive week at their assigned schools, where they were expected to teach longer projects and units. Student teaching encompassed the third and final semester of the program. Special education and early childhood education students often felt overwhelmed by the requirements of their majors as well as those of the program, so a better curriculum was designed for them. When they realized that the program's courses could help them better prepare for their roles as future teachers, the courses became more relevant to them. The program addressed specific strategies that all students could use to individualize teaching (e.g., cooperative learning and thematic projects). Today, a cohesive atmosphere exists between students in special education, early childhood education, and elementary education. (SM)

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INNOVATIONS IN TEACHER PRESERVICE PROGRAMS

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Innovations in Teacher Preservice Programs

Our university endorsed an elementary education program five years ago that incorporated more time spent in elementary sites. A model in many educators' minds for evaluating teachers is the one used by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). McCracken & Stover (1999) believe this model is inappropriate for evaluating large numbers of people, such as all the preservice teachers in 50 states. They lament the "test-taking" assessments required in this model. Our elementary created out own model for the needs of our university preservice teachers. Our model consisted of three consecutive semesters of courses combined with fieldwork. The first semester consisted of a methods course, a reading class, and a children's literature class. Additional time was spent out in the field observing and teaching elementary students. The following semester, students enrolled in five methods courses in mathematics, science, social studies, language arts, and reading. During this semester, students not only spent a day every week in their field sites, but an additional intensive week at their

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assigned elementary schools, where they were expected to teach longer projects and units. Student teaching encompassed the third and final semester of the program.

Early Innovations

During my first two years my first two years at the university, I was involved in both the first and second semester programs. I taught the children's literature courses to our first semester, or field one students and a language art class to a section of students enrolled in the second semester, or field two component of the program. In the first-semester program, the fieldwork became a major investment in perhaps our most important change.

During the first year I was involved in the program, students went into a variety of schools for a half-day for seven weeks. During that time, they did not meet for one of our class sessions. Another professor and I supervised all 100 students while they were at their elementary sites. Previously, the courses had not included fieldwork at all; an adjunct faculty member who continued with us the first year did not become involved in supervision.

The other professor and I discovered students needed much

more than a half-day to be out in the schools, working with teachers. Students told us they wanted to observe and do more lessons out in the filed. We agreed with them. A study examining preservice teachers' perceptions (Hardy, C.A., 1999) of how they felt a school-based experience helped them learn to teach discovered participants placed their highest value on the accumulation of experiences learned through field experiences.

For the remainder of our first year, we merely followed the prescribed curriculum. We knew, however, that what we wanted, consistent with the research (Wood, 1999), was that the practice of teaching and the theory behind it might be used in a complementary rather than a dichotomous fashion.

Our request for more time out in the field was granted. The following year, we sent students into the field to observe and teach lessons for a full day each week for eight weeks. We added specific instructions that helped students learn school politics and reflect on environment and structural systems. We began to address the needs of special education students by having them pick out individual students to observe and teach.

The second semester field program benefited by having all of us who taught a methods course integrates our course with one another. For example, a language arts lesson assigned for my class might also serve as a science lesson in another methods course. We hired additional personnel to help us observe and supervise students as they spent more time in their assigned schools. Students integrated curriculum designed for our classes into their field lessons.

The third semester of student teaching also underwent renovations. Coursework was tightened to allow student teachers to spend their entire time in their field experiences. Additional personnel were hired and trained to observe and supervise these students at their elementary school sites. Once a month, student teachers returned to the university for additional instruction, to meet with their supervisors, and to complete their portfolios.

Meeting early childhood and special education needs

Special education and early childhood students came to the program with additional concerns. Although the majority of students in both areas valued our courses, a wide variety of coursework in

their majors was already a prerequisite before they even entered our program. Requirements for these students included many courses elementary education students did not take. Special education and early childhood majors sometimes felt overwhelmed and carried their stress into our classrooms. Meeting with other professors in their departments and using their suggestions helped us design a better curriculum for them. For example, with the advent of mainstreaming, special education professors emphasized the importance of observing and teaching in regular classrooms. Early childhood majors were encouraged to use multiple intelligences to set up individual learning centers, which was an important part of their organizational system. When both groups realized our courses could help them become better prepared for their future roles as teachers, our classes became more relevant to them. We also addressed specific strategies all students could do with students to individualize teaching, such cooperative learning and thematic projects. Today a cohesive atmosphere between students in special education, early childhood education and elementary education exists. Working together also enhanced faculty relations in these areas

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